



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Romania could become a model for post-populist restructuring in Europe



The drama of the second round of the Romanian presidential **elections** has opened a new chapter in the process of consolidating democracy in the country and has clearly shown its path within European integration.

After the first round in November 2024 was cancelled due to evidence of foreign interference, citizens gathered again at polling stations on 18 May with a clear message – protecting the electoral process and defending the rule of law are more important than populist statements.

In an atmosphere of heightened political tensions, abstentions fell to a record low and voter turnout reached a 25-year high, confirming how much Romanians value stability and transparency.

The independent candidate, Nițușor Dan, who insisted on the continuity of the European course and the preservation of the NATO alliance in his campaign, took centre stage.

His pragmatic and calm approach, based on clear plans for economic stabilisation and the depoliticisation of public administration, was particularly popular in urban areas—in Bucharest, voter turnout was as high as 65 per cent, while in rural areas it fell to 35 per cent.

Although he was initially about 20 percentage points behind George Simion, the **leader** of the ultranationalist party that received the most diaspora votes abroad, particularly in Germany, Italy, and Spain, Dan managed to win over key demographic groups—among Romanians of the Hungarian minority, he received up to 90 per cent of the vote in some districts.

Budgetary challenges

The decisive turning point came after the only public duel, in which Simion's unsubstantiated claims about "stolen elections" and mention of the US blacklist for travel visas seemed chaotic and unconvincing, while Dan's precision and focus on reform steps recalled the discipline of the former German chancellor.

This distinction between persuasive expertise and unpredictable nationalism decided the race, from which Dan emerged victorious with 53.6 per cent of the vote.

Winning the majority is only the first step

However, winning the majority is only the first step. Romania is currently facing serious budgetary challenges: the deficit has **reached** 9.3 per cent of GDP in 2024, the highest level in the European Union, while public debt is steadily rising, causing concern among investors and credit rating agencies.

In an attempt to stabilise the leu, the Romanian Central Bank intervened with more than three billion euros at the beginning of May, going beyond the measures taken during the most difficult days of the pandemic.

To avoid further turmoil, Dan must accelerate the absorption of resources from European funds, carry out an urgent modernisation of public administration, and seriously reduce waste in numerous sectors until citizens feel the immediate benefits.

EU and NATO commitment

Simultaneously, his pro-European stance conveys a distinct message to his international allies.

The swift confirmation of strategic agreements with Ukraine and the active preparations for the forthcoming NATO summit in The Hague prove that Bucharest has **no intention** of withdrawing from the defence line of the alliance's south-eastern flank.

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received a congratulatory message from President Zelenskyy, which was interpreted in diplomatic circles as confirmation of the strengthening of bilateral cooperation in the field of humanitarian aid and military training for the Ukrainian armed forces.

Economic and administrative reforms

However, the issues of social cohesion remain unresolved. The division between urban and rural areas and the gap between the local population and the diaspora point to deep inequalities in economic distribution and access to public services.

Many Romanians living outside the big cities still feel marginalised, which makes them susceptible to populist messages and conspiracy theories. Real results, such as rebuilding the healthcare system in less developed regions, modernising schools, and transparently managing public finances, build trust in this regard.

Only if people feel that European money is really going to them and not to the political elites will this victory be of lasting value.

The inclusion of young people in political life and in the economy requires special attention.

Vocational training programmes and grants for technological start-ups could bridge the generation gap and bring innovation to communities. At the same time, investment in digital centres in smaller towns and villages will create a foundation for the development of new entrepreneurial initiatives and keep young professionals in the country.



Dan must show determination to strengthen the independent judiciary and fight corruption in order to strengthen trust in state institutions – Palace of Justice, Bucharest

It is also necessary to strengthen public transport, which connects remote regions with economic centres. Modernised rail and road connections and transparent project management are tangible proof that government funds bring about positive changes in the everyday lives of citizens.

Dan must show determination to strengthen the independent judiciary and fight corruption in order to strengthen trust in state institutions.

The transparent appointment of judges at local and national levels and the introduction of clearly defined criteria for assessing their competence will serve as a signal that the government does not determine outcomes according to its own standards.

In parallel, it is necessary to introduce regular reports on progress in the fight against corrupt practices that are accessible to the public and the media without censorship. This is the only way to break the long-standing cycle of clientelism and restore citizens' faith that justice will apply equally to all in the future.

Stronger regional alliances

At the same time, Romania has the opportunity to position itself as a pioneer of the new EU enlargement initiative, advocating the accelerated **integration** of Ukraine and

Moldova.

In addition to active diplomatic lobbying in Brussels and Berlin, Bucharest should offer neighbouring countries a programme of professional and technical support, particularly in the areas of public financial management and digital transformation.

Any delay in achieving concrete results risks the return of nationalist movements to the political stage

This would strengthen Romania's strategic position, strengthen its voice in the Union and show that the European perspective can be realistic and accessible to those who implement concrete reforms.

If Bucharest succeeds in showing that it can harmonise economic interests with European standards, Romania could become a model for post-populist restructuring in Europe.

Conversely, any delay in achieving concrete results risks the return of nationalist movements to the political stage. This opportunity is fragile – it requires commitment, transparency, and, above all, honest dialogue with citizens.

Otherwise, the democratic charge that led to this victory could quickly be replaced by disillusionment and renewed divisions.